It's All Up To You (Previously called Regretful Goodbyes in early stages of writing)

A short story by J.C.

Dean's perspective

Screams echoing my head, heart beating fast, I grabbed the handle bars and peddled as fast as I could. The hard rain poured down, soaking my clothes and backpack, raindrops getting all on my glasses, but I took a deep breath and continued despite the harsh weather. All I could hear now was the fast drip-drops on the asphalt, and for a second, even in this adrenaline-filled moment, I felt a bit of peace to only hear the rain and faraway cars. I sighed and looked left and right, making sure no cars would come by. I now accepted as I got further away, there was no turning back. I peddled faster, thinking, *surely they hadn't come back to get me? I don't want to be back home ever again.*

I looked to my right, and there was a girl walking in the grass beside the road. Probably another runaway from this god-forsaken neighborhood. I stopped and walked over, since she looked to not have very much. I didn't know this decision would change the course of my life forever.

The girl looked no older than 14, me being 15. She was blonde with freckles on her face, a bit shorter than me. She was wearing a plain t-shirt and jeans, black boots, and some fingerless gloves. She carried a small backpack on her shoulders, like me, but hers was grey and mine was black. I had just been wearing a hoodie and sweatpants and some beat-up sneakers, which, admittedly, were not great for running if necessary. She had been more prepared. I wondered what she'd gone through. *Couldn't have been any better than what I did,* I thought.

Finally after all that thinking, she asked me, "What d'ya want?" I answered, or technically asked, "Are you okay?" She paused and then replied, "Honestly, no. But you don't seem like you have a lot either." "Not like I have anything to lose." I answered, again. It was true, I didn't. "You coming?" I asked. "Where?" She replied. "I dunno." I said. She shrugged and walked over to my bike, and hoping it could hold us, I biked down far away, searching for somewhere we could sleep. We settled on an abandoned house, the one kinda close to mine that they never finished building.

Although not the safest, we were glad it was something, and I sat my hoodie and backpack down and laid down on my hoodie. The floor was dusty and the air felt thick but I brushed it aside because, where else would I be? It was now hours past when it first turned dark, and quite frankly, I was tired. But before I fell asleep, she sat her things down as well, and asked me, "What's your name?" "Dean." She nodded. "I'm Brooke. I'm thinkin' we'll go to a store tomorrow." Looks like she was already thinking ahead. I went to sleep. I don't know what she was doing, because I was asleep.

Brooke's perspective

The next morning we went to a convenience store, which I quickly led Dean to. Specifically a convenience store because they seem to care less. I was thinking about how sad it was that all these kids are running away, but I knew

my way around, so I wasn't as lost as him. Even though he's older than me he seems more naïve, coming up to girls on the side of the road. Well, here we are. The cashier didn't even seem to care as some rain-soaked kids came into the store with some damn backpacks. He probably thought we lived close or something. He started to care after around 30 minutes though, when we walked around just waiting for the weather to get better.

"Anything I can help 'ya with or do you wanna be kicked out?" The cashier finally said. Dean came running out, as the coward I could tell he was, and I ran to the bathroom, hiding there until the cashier calmed down and some other customer could distract him. When he wasn't looking, I stashed some water bottles in my backpack and ran to find Dean still waiting on his bike for me. He was clearly annoyed that I took so long as he had to wait in the rain.

"Sorry." I remarked insincerely. "But look what I got, okay," I said while showing the water bottles I looted. Then I had to scream for him to go and peddle fast 'cause the cashier was looking back at us with suspicion.

Riding down the road in the rain with a bike is so fun, though. At least there was that—I could get some fun out of this! Stealing with no repercussions, 'cause, what else can I do? I'm just a poor girl…oh man, my life has finally started! It doesn't seem like Dean is too happy with his situation, though. How sad.

Since we obviously can't go back to that store because we'd get caught, we decided to go to the WOODS of all places. We're gonna get eaten alive! We're gonna die! We're gonna get lost! I said all that stuff to him, but he didn't care. Where WOULD we go? We're in the middle of nowhere at this point. I fell asleep, and I kept thinking. Middle of nowhere…nowhere… nowhere. That's where we are now, right? NOWHERE!

Dean's perspective

I don't know how this happened. I'm afraid. Very afraid. This was a mistake. Did I trip here? I should've never done this! Brooke seems too calm in this—this mess!

I don't even know how to begin to describe it, I woke up and it's like a whole other reality of a bloody mess. And I'm not British. It's just actual flesh and architecture, as I found stepping out the forest, and I'd say it's worse than dystopia. I'd kill myself if it weren't for the fact I have some hope to get back. A blob of something walked up to me and I kicked it. Brooke pulled out a gun from her backpack and shot it, so casually too. I wonder where she got that and how the hell she brought it into a store earlier. Then I remembered we are in the southern United States…or at least were. I don't know where we are now. I think she stole it from her parents, probably for safety, being a young girl out by herself.

I told Brooke my thoughts and she thought it was a dumb idea to fight when you don't even know if you'll get out. We might be stuck in a really bad reality. She said she didn't mind all that much, so long as she gets used to it, and a plus is "justified killing" whatever that means. Did she want to kill

people? God, I'm in the worst situation. I'm with a homicidal teen girl in a mess of flesh and the buildings I used to know. This all just happened all too fast, you know? But I can't get stuck on this, I have to figure out what to do. I have this sick feeling in my stomach any time my eyes are open.

Fortunately, my bike and backpack were intact. I was so relieved to have something to live off of, because I was not about to cannibalize myself or Brooke or one of these damn flesh blobs. I had packed some canned food. Actually, I am pretty hungry now. I'm gonna eat some.

I sat down and ate canned food while Brooke searched around for something to do. It looked like there were no humans here. We thought maybe we just hadn't searched hard enough, so Brooke continued searching.

Brooke's perspective

I've been walking in circles! This place is truly a NIGHTMARE. I think I'm a little bit insane though, finding a sort of beauty in it. All the trees and blood and endless roads, and getting that satisfying feeling when I see those blobs and then click! It splatters everywhere. Oh, God I feel horrible! So far, there have been no signs of life other than the plants and flesh…things.

I decided if we were gonna do all this walking around and killing and all that, we should be prepared. My long hair was getting in the way, I had no hair tie, and Dean has pretty long hair too, so I suggested we cut it. With what, you ask? I brought a knife with me as well, mainly for actually cutting things if necessary. Dean refused profusely, to my confusion, so I just let him be and cut my own. I looked like shit but I was feeling energised!

I went out for hours, and realised I got super lost. Luckily, my backpack was on my shoulders. I mean, how else would I carry my stuff around, even if it is heavy? I sat down hoping Dean may follow me, because being alone in this hellhole may be even worse than having a random older kid with you. I suppose he's like, 16. I'm 13. *Oh, you're 13, don't be cussing like that and killing! You should know better!* Aw, shut up. No one's here anyways. I don't know who I'm talking to. I think loneliness is catching up to me…

Now it's getting dark, so I need to find somewhere to sleep. It's not raining here, so I think I'll just get my backpack to lay on and, it's a little cold here too, so I will start a little bonfire next to me.

Dean's perspective

I woke up to Brooke being nowhere to be seen, and my glasses on the ground and cracked. I must've moved in my sleep. I'm gonna search around to find her, because she has some supplies and she's the only one with a weapon, which I may need, just in case.

While searching, I really got to see more of what this place is. The sky is still blue underneath all the fog, I think it's from pollution from a factory I saw nearby, and there's probably water around making it all cloudy. There's so many buildings here compared to back home, it's more like a city than the suburban-rural area I was used to. Then—it happened. One of the flesh blobs came up to me! I was afraid it would hurt me, and it bit my leg. I was spiraling, thinking maybe there are no humans here because these things ate

them!
I shook it off and grabbed it, feeling it squeeze like chunks of jello as it choked. In some twisted way I was satisfied, but also a little disgusted. Maybe it's the feeling you get from killing a bug. But I don't feel anything killing bugs! Oh man, this place is making me evil. I brushed past that and just kept walking and yelling Brooke's name.
Finally, I found her! How convenient. Maybe she can help me get over my fears here, since she seems so chill about everything. She told me she was hoping I would find her. I smiled. Maybe we can get along. I looked up, and a drizzle of rain began.
I guess it was expected, because of how cloudy it was here. It started to put out the fire she started. We got up and walked around to search for where we would go tomorrow. I just realised I had not come up with any plan to get out of here, and thought, *shouldn't that be my number one priority? I've got to think of something!*
But I thought of nothing, we know nothing about this place except what we had already observed.
Brooke's perspective
Dean found me, thankfully, so I think we should be fine. I plan on spending my day as the last one. I think this place is gonna make me go more insane if it keeps repeating, though.
Now we're in a more secluded area. Many more trees and fewer buildings, I like it better, it's quieter. I could get used to this. I found some new creatures today, hanging on the leaves. It looked like insects. I let them be. They probably are good for this environment, even if it's a grotesque one. But that don't mean I'm leaving everything alone here…'ya never know what's dangerous.
I wasn't paying attention, walking forward, looking left and right like it was automatic, and then it happened! The flesh blob was ripping at my skin! It was glossy and the color you get when putting your finger over a flashlight. A few more seconds watching it and I would vomit.
I had to puncture the goddamn thing with my fingernail, and I watched it ooze out with blood and some other pale yellow liquid, before I shot it. Click, bang, done. My leg had hurt so bad now, but I had to wait until Dean noticed me. He was way ahead of me on his bike.
I ran as fast as I could down the road, breathing hard, and after a few minutes and a good yell, he stopped and looked a little concerned. He asked me why I hadn't rode the bike with him. I rolled my eyes and hopped on. I now had a chance to stop, so I searched my bag for bandages. I wrapped my leg up and watched the blood from my skin being RIPPED OFF soak the thing. I couldn't cry about it, though. I had a sense we'd just have to keep moving around here.
Dean's perspective
Well today was eventful. We finally found a nice patch of trees and grass, which seemed to be exceedingly rare the more we got lost in here, to sit on.

Brooke and I sat down and I drank from my bottle of water while Brooke drank water and some other drink she brought in a metal bottle that I just didn't ask about yet. But I did decide to ask something else.
"Hey, why'd you run away in the first place?" I asked her. She looked a little shocked that I'd even say anything, and hesitant. "If it helps I can talk about my story first." She nodded. "Yeah, go ahead." I took out some canned green beans from my backpack and then told her while eating it.
"Well, I ran away because of a huge fight with my family…it ended up with my dad being violent so I just took my things and left." She took another swig from her metal bottle. "Typical…well, I guess I owe you my story now. But you ain't gonna snitch when we get back, are 'ya?" I nodded. Why would I? No reason to unless she'd try to hurt me. And I don't think she has any will for that.
"My parents were also mad at me, because I hadn't gone to class for the last few days and I was gettin' real tired of them. I also was in big trouble at school for cuttin' class and sneakin' in my parents' liquor, 'cause, I got some problems. But I think you can tell that just by lookin' at me. It's not my fault. If a little girl's gotta run away from her problems, shouldn't they check her home life? Nah! 'Cause schools don't care about us!" She said the last sentence throwing her hands in the air. It'd turned into a rant about the American school system and her parents sucking.
I thought *she's undeniably crazy, but I can't blame her, because I'd probably end up the same if my life was just a bit worse.* So I didn't judge. "Wow, okay. Is that their liquor you're drinking right now?" I said, pointing to her bottle. "Wha-no! I gotta keep a lookout here, y'know? This just has uh…soda, for the caffeine. I ain't got coffee." I giggled. "You have liquor but not coffee? What kinda house did'ya live in?" She didn't seem as amused as me. "You can hide a bottle but not the sounds of the coffee machine, obviously. You don't know anything, do you? Now, let's stop talkin' about it." I scraped the last bits of my canned green beans and ate them.
I offered some of my food to her, but she said she already had some canned pasta. She ate that while I spent my time thinking and making sure I didn't get bit again.
Then when it got late, I laid my jacket down again. Looks like she didn't bring one. How could she forget a jacket but she brings some damn soda? She's really something! As the sky got darker, I thought about my old life again, and how I'm probably never going back. I remembered how I loved to listen to music and liked playing sports with my friends. I'm never getting that back unless Brooke likes sports. And I definitely won't get the music back, I should've brought an iPod or something, but I didn't, so no more dwelling on it. I was thinking that maybe I'm becoming useless around here, so I decided the next morning, I should learn how to kill, and cook once we ran out of canned food.
Brooke's perspective

Today Dean asked me how he should go about “self defense” without a weapon. I gave him my knife. “Finally wantin’ to be useful, I see?” I said. He told me to shut up, which I guess was justified. Maybe he could use it to help cook when it got to that point, if he even knew *how*.

We walked trying to find some shelter so we wouldn’t be stuck in the woods. I figured being stuck in the woods would mean we could get hurt or killed while asleep. Guess where we went again!

Another abandoned building. But this time, it’s a store! Great! That was sarcastic, by the way. It smells weird. But I guess we can salvage the food and everything here, so that’s better than a normal ol’ house.

I wonder if this world used to have humans. Logically, it would have to if they have these factories and stores, right? Maybe these flesh things killed ‘em all. That’d be funny. Imagine dying to a non-poisonous creature that’s like, less than half your size. It has to be embarrassing. And to go extinct, as well? I just got here and I survived, those people must’ve been pathetic. But that’s enough about that.

I’m starting to miss making art at this point. Took me long enough, right? Haha. But that’s what you gotta do in a terrible artless environment. Find new hobbies, go insane, or kill yourself. My new hobbies will be running around, killing, and maybe biking when Dean isn’t looking. See, I’ve got it all figured out. Go ahead and call me quick-witted! And when I can’t take it, I got a gun to sort that out! But I don’t believe I’m so worthless to do such a thing normally. That’s only a last resort purely to prevent more suffering. It also gives Dean some food if he’s into cannibalism.

Dean’s perspective

Now that we have somewhere to sleep for the night, I finally got some more canned food, which was becoming more apparently scarce. Some cold pasta. Yum.

I took a few bites and Brooke took out her food, which was field peas. I’d think of it as a side dish, but here you get what you get. It looked like she was also running out of food. That made me think about if there was anything edible here. We would never know what was safe to eat, so I guess we will die of starvation or poisoning. Hooray. I finished my pasta pretty quickly, so I tried to talk to Brooke so I wouldn't be so bored.

“Hey, Brooke, have you seen how your haircut looks?” She looked up with an annoyed expression and sighed. “Oh, right, I probably look like a dude. Or ugly? Is it ugly?”

“No, it’s not ugly.” She giggled, and replied, “Yeah, yeah. Looks like we’re havin’ some very useful conversations in this hellhole.” I nodded. She scraped the last bits of her peas and ate it. “What grade were you in?” “9th. Freshman year.” “Okay! Do you know algebra? Maybe I you can teach me algebra, so I’m not stupid!” I would not be doing that, so I let her know. “In what world would I willingly teach algebra? I’ve got free will, and that’s a stupid use of it.” She agreed and started to put her things up. I did too. Then

we went to sleep, and that was that day. No flesh blobs or bugs coming for us today, so I'd say it was a good day. This store is doing good things for us!

Brooke's perspective

Since we have a good shelter with lots of options, we'll be staying here for a while. I was glad to not have to constantly be on high alert.

I've been coming up with a theory for what happened to this place. I think my apocalypse idea is likely. Haha, I sound like a real scientist right now! Anyway, there's not a lot of bread left in this store, and if there is, it's starting to mold. There's not a lot of canned food either. 'Guess I'm looking in other aisles for food.

I grabbed whatever was left of the canned food and also got some bottles of water to add to what we already had. I showed Dean and he was glad we wouldn't be starving. Y'know, he looks real pretty for a boy. Sometimes I think about him more than I should, but I won't mention it to him because he probably thinks he's too old for me.

I was getting really bored so I looked to see if there were any supplies for art or books. I couldn't find any pencils or paper, but I could find some old books. I was glad to finally have something to do. I think this is where we'll stay unless it becomes unsafe somehow.

Dean decided to get a book too, but he seemed to get bored quickly. I guess he's not much of a reader. I decided I should ask him what he does like to do, and he said he likes sports and music. No luck for him here.

Looking around the store, I found some liquor so I added that to my bottle. Just in case, y'know. But I doubt I'll be drinking much anymore when I have to fight for my survival. I'm just starting to get really sick of it, and a backup plan would be nice. Oh how I love altering my mind to forget about my problems! People are so uniquely prone to addiction, and I think I'm proof of it at 13 years old. Am I just a lost cause?

Dean's perspective

The days before were getting repetitive, so me and Brooke stopped writing for a while. I don't know how long it's been. Maybe a couple months? A year? I don't know. I'm going a little crazy. I've heard being in the same situation for days makes you go insane, especially in white rooms. Guess what color the wall of this store is? White. I feel like crying. I want to go outside to do something better, but I also don't want to die out there.

Brooke doesn't want to talk to me, and I can't do anything I love.

If you're reading this, I'm dead.

Brooke's perspective

Well that was anticlimactic. Might as well go as well if I can't talk to anyone. Mine'll be faster with a gun. Goodbye! I wonder how those teachers will feel now!

Dean's perspective

Screams echoing my head, heart beating fast, I grabbed the handle bars and peddled as fast as I could. The hard rain…why do I feel like I've written this before? Why am I so far in the pages?

…
This is my chance to make things right.

Epilogue

What the hell was any of that about? Well, there was supposed to be more here, but I figured I should just get the theme in there and end it before it gets too repetitive. This was supposed to be about what people do in bad situations and how when you're in these situations, you should just try your best. I hope I got that across clearly enough.

So what happened after Dean and Brooke came back? Well, they did all the same things without going into the forest, and “tried their best” until they were able to get jobs. Dean would get a job first and then provide for them until Brooke could work and live on her own. They then went their separate ways and lived as normally as they could.